Juno Steel and the Seven Birds

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Juno Steel and the Seven Birds

by butterflyranchu

Summary

For Juno and Benzaiten Steel, any job that will get them off of Mars seems like a dream job. So when they hear about the Institute of Planar Research and Exploration, they jump at the chance. They couldn't have known it would take them on journey spanning a hundred universes, over a hundred years and greater challenges than they could have imagined, as well as give them the best family they'd ever had in their five shipmates- Rita, Jet, Peter, Buddy and Vespa.

And they definitely didn't know that as well as exploring and researching, they would be caught up trying to stop a mysterious entity they called the Hunger from consuming each universe they visited.

They also didn't anticipate forgetting the whole thing, being separated for a decade, and almost destroying a whole world by themselves… but they probably couldn't pin that one entirely on the job.

A TAZ: Balance AU in which the Carte Blanche is the Starblaster, the crime crew are the seven birds, and various other people cameo where I needed a character. Fun, angst, and shenanigans ensue.

Notes

Hey! This fic was written as part the Penumbra Podcast Minibang 2019-20 and I had so much fun doing it, especially since I got to work with such amazing artists. You can find them on tumblr:
@mloking
@phosphoro (twitter @gaybugboy)
@lucarosearts
@5qui99l3 (twitter @5qui99l3)
@scintillart (twitter @shitdudeidk)

Juno and Benzaiten Steel had been sick of Mars for years. There had never been anything for them there, and that had been clear almost ever since they could remember- even before Oldtown, their mother hadn't been all there, and after they moved it was a thousand times worse.

At least before, they had had a mother who, despite her many flaws, had wanted them and taken care of them. Sarah made it pretty clear she didn't want the twins any more the day she tried to kill Ben.

Their mother had been in a terrible mood that morning, flitting at a moment's notice between anger and awful sadness, and Ben hadn't wanted to leave her alone. It was fucked up, an eleven-year-old boy staying home to make sure his mother was okay when she probably wouldn't have even done the same for him, but that was the way Ben was. Juno couldn't have cared less about her near the end- she had made his and his twin's life a living hell for the past seven years- but to Ben, he still saw the person she used to be, a person he loved, and he saw her suffering.

Juno admired that about him, even if he couldn't understand it.

So he left for school alone, and let what he thought were worst-case scenarios run around in his head all day. Upon returning home, he realised fast that he had not had any idea at all what the worst-case scenario truly was.

Now, Juno wishes he had done something about it, wished he had known to stay home, even though he knows he couldn't have. They were just kids, after all, their age barely in double figures, even if they had already been taking care of each other for years. He was just grateful that he had gotten home in time, hadn't hung around with Mick and Sasha after school, because if he had waited any longer he might not have had a twin any more.

As it was, he had called the right people at the right time, Sarah had been arrested and Ben taken to the hospital, where, eventually, he recovered. The few days before Ben woke up were easily the worst of Juno's life so far, except, of course, the moment he had caught sight of his brother lying face down on the floor of their family home.

After that, they had kind of expected that there would be someone to find where they would live, who would take care of them. It soon became clear that nothing of the sort was going to happen. Years later, it made complete sense to Juno- why would any authority on

Mars care about two more scrappy elven kids from Oldtown who wouldn't amount to anything anyway?

God, he hated Mars.

They hadn't really stayed anywhere permanent for the remainder of their childhoods. Sometimes they found temporary residence with a kindly neighbour or a friend's family (they stayed with Mick many times) but often they had had to fend for themselves on the streets.

The longest they had stayed anywhere was soon after they had gotten the news of the death of their mother. An old friend of hers that the twins very vaguely remembered had taken pity on them and let them stay under her roof for a few weeks. Not only had she given them her spare room, but she gave them her time, too, and took it upon herself to teach the twins to cook.

They had fun with it, and she let them- Ben would dance around the kitchen while stirring ingredients and teach Juno how to follow along, they would experiment with new recipes and flavours, and they knew that, for now, they could relax a little. But of course, she had never intended to take in two of someone else's children on a permanent basis, and eventually they were homeless once more.

Once they were old enough, they could find real work, work that paid enough that eventually they could afford to rent a flat for the two of them instead of relying on whoever they could find to give them somewhere to sleep. Ben's favourite job was as a dance instructor- Juno wasn't surprised in the slightest. He loved to dance, obviously, and he was sweet and patient- of course he'd be wonderful with kids as well.

Mostly for fun, they ended up getting into magic- it was as useful a skill as any, and good for self defence if it came to it. They started learning together at first, working on the same spells, but it soon became clear that their interests lay in different places. While Ben favoured flashy transmutations, mostly using them to show off while doing otherwise mundane tasks like cooking, Juno preferred the power he found in fire evocations. They took to studying separately to focus on their own skills, then eagerly showing off to the other once they had mastered a new spell.

And then, Juno found out about the Institute of Planar Research and Exploration.

It was perfect. Their accommodation would be provided for them, and

they would be paid enough to be able to make their own meals if the food provided for them was too terrible. They would be expected to work pretty hard at the training they'd be given, but that was okay. They both knew how to pick up new skills quickly.

And the best part- if they were good enough, this was their ticket off Mars, hell, out of this universe, far, far away from the place they'd been abused, looked down on and ignored almost their entire lives.

He just hoped that what magic they had picked up over the past few years was enough to get them both in.

He took the flyer he'd been reading, along with an extra just in case, and thrust one of them into Ben's hands as soon as he opened the door to Juno's frantic knocks.

"At least get through the door first," Ben laughed, moving out of the doorway with his hand still on the door handle so he could close it after Juno got past. As he did so, he started reading the crumpled paper he held in his other hand. Juno watched as he did so, anxious about what his initial reaction would be.

"Where did you get this?" Ben frowned. "I thought you literally just went to get groceries."

"Someone was handing them out."

Juno went through into the kitchen to unpack the shopping, and Ben followed him, still reading. The longer he was quiet for, the more Juno convinced himself that his brother would hate the idea. It was the best opportunity they'd had in a while, yes, but he knew it would take a lot for Ben to give up teaching dance.

"Okay."

"Wait, what?"

"Okay. Let's do it."

This was decidedly not what Juno had been expecting to hear, but he couldn't say it was an unpleasant surprise.

"What about your classes?"

Ben shrugged.
"I like my job, but I can't make a living by working a few hours a

week forever. Anyway, it's not like this is the only job I'll ever like. I can find something else if this doesn't work out." He paused, but Juno could tell he wasn't finished, so he waited for him to continue.

"And I can tell you're excited about this. If it's important to you, of course we can try it."

Juno tried to scowl at the decidedly sappy turn the conversation had taken, but it didn't really work and so he let himself give Ben a small smile instead.

"If you're sure," he said, even though he knew Ben was- he wouldn't have agreed if he hadn't meant it.

Ben didn't respond to that, but he did finally follow Juno into the kitchen and affix the paper he had been reading directly in the centre of their pin board. The next morning, they drove to the address printed on the flyer and filled out two application forms, making sure to write in all capitals on the back of each that they had their own condition- neither would be attending without his twin.

In reality, it took about a month for them to hear back from the Institute, but it felt more like a year when they hadn't been given a time frame- each day they checked the mail hoping for two acceptance letters, and each day they were disappointed.

Until, one day, they weren't.

The letters arrived early in the morning- Juno was in the middle of blearily traipsing from his bedroom to the kitchen for some coffee when he saw them. Two identical envelopes, each bearing the logo of the Institute of Planar Research and Exploration, sat by the front door of the flat, underneath the letterbox.

"Ben!" Juno yelled in the general direction of his brother's room. He received only a muffled groan in response.

Juno had imagined this more often than he'd care to admit, and when he had, he'd thought he wouldn't be able to get the envelope open fast enough- even worried that he'd tear the letter by accident in his haste. But now that it was there in front of him, he was almost afraid to touch it. It was Schrödinger's acceptance letter, and if he never opened it they would never be turned away.

He shouted for Ben again, and when it was no more successful than the first time he picked up both letters and burst into his brother's

room without knocking. That seemed to wake him up- he had slept in just his boxers and scrambled to pull the duvet further over himself. For a moment Juno caught sight of the scar on Ben's back left there by their mother's blaster, and he scowled at it briefly until it was hidden.

Once Ben was situated, Juno tossed his own letter onto the bed, keeping his brother's for himself.

"I can't open it. Let's look at each others'." He explained when Ben raised an eyebrow.

It seemed that that was the moment Ben fully processed what was happening, as his eyes lit up and when he looked back up at Juno from the envelope in his lap he was beaming.

"You gonna count us in, Super Steel?" Ben asked, and Juno nodded, adjusting his hold on the envelope so that he was ready to rip it open and waiting for his brother to do the same.

He counted back from five, and they tore open the envelopes and pulled out the letters as one.

Perhaps opening each others' letters hadn't been as smart of a plan as Juno had thought. He was just as nervous for Ben as for himself, and he had to force himself to actually process what he was reading.
Dear Mr. Steel,
It is with great pleasure that I am writing to inform you of your acceptance onto our program at the Institute of Planar Research and Exploration. We are excited for you to join us in September to begin your training.

That was as far as Juno got, for now. He looked up and found Ben already looking at him, still smiling widely, and he realised he now wore the exact same expression. The two began to speak at the exact same time.

"You got in!"

Juno practically launched himself onto the bed and pulled Ben into a tight hug. He was both relieved and genuinely surprised- with the amount of worrying he had done in the past month, he had pretty much convinced himself it would be a definite no.

Since Juno had discarded Ben's letter on the floor when he got on the bed, the brothers read through the rest of Juno's letter together. They had a few weeks before they could move into their accommodation, which would be enough time to pack the things they needed, and

classes would start a week later. When they finished reading through the information about picking up timetables, Juno flopped backwards onto the pillows, looking up at Ben with a smile.

“What?” Ben caught his expression and raised an eyebrow.

“Nothing,” Juno replied. This was the kind of feeling he could write paragraphs about, but only in his own head. He’d never been one to do that out loud, when he could help it.

“If it’s about this it involves me, so you legally have to tell me.”

“Fine,” Juno grimaced, but it was for show and they both knew it. If there was one person Juno knew he could tell literally anything to, it was Ben. “I know it’s cheesy, but I just… I just feel like this is the start of the rest of our lives."

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The morning they left was more than a little surreal. There were crowds watching as they boarded the ship, cheering and screaming like they were heroes. When it lifted off the ground, hundreds of people waved and shouted their goodbyes to these seven people they had never even met.

Juno had never experienced anything like this in his life.

He stood on the deck next to Ben, and they watched in silence as Mars got smaller and smaller behind them. They were leaving behind, at least for a while, everything their home planet had put them through, all the bullshit, everyone who had looked down on them their entire lives. And it was exhilarating.

It was something that for a long, long time, neither of them had thought they would ever do.

“Do you think it’s going to be weird?” Ben asked, quietly. They had been silent for a few minutes now, and the question took Juno by surprise.

“Will what be weird?” Juno responded at the same volume.

“Being here.” This time Ben spoke louder, but in Elvish, after a quick glance around had confirmed the others were definitely within

earshot. “Not having to worry about money. Not having to worry about what other people think. Everyone here sees us as their equals, Juno, for the first time in our lives.”

Juno nodded, slowly.

“Of course. Do you think we’ll be here long enough to get used to it before we come home again?” Juno wasn’t sure what answer he wanted to that- he wanted to feel comfortable with these people and enjoy his time on the Carte Blanche, but the more he did so, the worse it would feel when they returned home.

Although, they would have the benefit of being minor celebrities, at least for a while.

“I hope so.”

Juno’s only response was a hum, and they settled back into their comfortable silence. They were far enough from Mars now that had they not known, it wouldn’t have even been clear that that was where they came from. They were surrounded by other planets, moons and stars, and the whole crew was enraptured by the view as they got closer and closer to leaving their planar system entirely.

As they watched in awe, though, they started to see something change. Right at the horizon on all sides, there were dark tendrils moving inwards, the colour draining from everything around them as they closed in.

At first they had been so distant that they hadn’t been noticed by the crew even as they gazed so intently into the distance, and by the time they were seen they were already close to covering up some of the outermost planets.

“What the hell is that?” Vespa exclaimed, at the same moment the blackness devoured its first planet.

Everyone went into panic mode, demanding answers they knew they wouldn’t get from no-one in particular, wanting to look away from what was happening but unable to look away as everything they knew was destroyed in front of them.

Buddy went inside to try to contact the institute, but returned shortly afterwards having had no success. By now it was becoming clear that whatever this was wasn’t about to stop, and if they didn’t get out of its reach right now, they never would.

“Alright. I’m going to get us out of here.” Buddy stated with an impressive amount of calm, then turned and strode back indoors, Vespa following her this time. The ship sped up dramatically, so much so that Ben stumbled a little into Juno, and Juno had to tighten his grip on the railing to stop himself from falling.

Even as they sped up, the tendrils were growing ever closer to the ship, and Buddy was having to dodge them, hoping that they would escape before there was nowhere to dodge to. At this point, the rest of the crew had hurried inside as well, not liking the unprotected feeling of standing out on the deck.

It was only a matter of seconds, but it felt as if an eternity passed like that before they could feel the space around them change, could feel themselves leaving their own planar system. At the same moment, they saw those pitch black tendrils finally cover up the last of the stars. And now, where their home had once been, only darkness remained.

Juno found Peter sitting just out of view of the Carte Blanche, leaning against a tree and glaring at his hands as if they’d somehow betrayed him.

“Rita’s been asking after you.” Juno said as a greeting. It was true- she hadn’t seen him all day, and she was desperate for his input on what film they should watch together tonight. She’d been dragging the twins and Peter into movie nights for a while, but over time she was working her way towards having the whole crew join them.

“Tell her I’ll be in soon,” Peter replied, not looking up from his hands, “I just needed some time to myself.”

“Want me to leave you alone?” Juno was standing against the tree opposite- waiting for Peter to at least look at him before he moved closer.
Peter shook his head.

“What are you thinking about?” Juno sat down across from him.

“Home.”

It had been a few months, now, since they had seen their planar system destroyed. They had felt themselves torn apart and put back together, and when the Carte Blanche landed back in the Prime

Material plane… it wasn't the same one that they had left.

They had tried to leave, to go back through whatever door they had arrived here by, but it just wasn't there. And then they had seen the Light of Creation arrive here, and then there were eyes, everywhere, looking down across the whole world.

That was a few days in. They had seen nothing since.

Everyone was grieving for the home they had lost, but Peter was one of the hardest hit. Before the IPRE, he had spent most of his life travelling. He wasn't even from Mars like most of them- he had been there mostly just for the Institute.

So, while of course Juno and Ben felt sadness, it was for a world they had seen very little of, and not particularly cared for. For Peter, he was mourning a vast universe he had known and loved his entire life.

"Tell me about it." Juno said, and Peter finally looked up at him.

"About home?"

"Yeah."

"I was mostly thinking about Brahma," He said, after a deep breath, "I couldn't even see it as we were leaving, and right as everything went black I realised it was maybe the one place I would have wanted to see. And there were so many more places I hadn't been to- I had a list. It's in the drawer by my bed right now, and I don't know that I'll ever cross anything else off of it. Sometimes thinking about the places I'll never know is worse than thinking about the places I knew and lost."

"I can't pretend it's the exact same thing, but I know what it's like to grieve a possibility. A lot in my life could have been different, and just a few choice moments robbed me of that."
Juno shuffled a little closer to Peter, and held his gaze as he said:

"But neither of us can change any of it now. We are here, wherever this is, and if we can get home, we will. We just don't know what's going on *yet*, that's all."

"Thank you, Juno." Peter said, and put his hand over Juno's where it rested on the ground. "That helps."

"Don't worry about it, Nureyev."

Juno was the one to break the eye contact, and they sat for a few more minutes in comfortable silence before Peter started to get up.

“I think we’ve kept Rita waiting long enough, don’t you?”

“Definitely,” Juno laughed, “God knows what she’ll make us watch if we don’t show up soon.”

By the time they got back to the ship, Rita had, in fact, already chosen a film. They were comforted only by the fact that by some miracle it was not the same one she had put on for four days in a row last week, to make sure everyone had been in the room and awake to see all of her favourite parts.

Although, if Juno was honest, the fact that he spent movie night sharing the sofa with Peter, leaning against him once they both got tired, was definitely not a down-side either.
In fact, it was quite the opposite.

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On the plus side, they had had a few cycles to get used to the idea that death wasn’t exactly permanent for them by the year they were separated for the first time.
And that helped, it did, but eleven months was still a hell of a long time to be without someone you have been side by side with since the day you were both born.

Juno wasn’t even there when it happened. Ben, Jet and Peter had gone planetside to start communications with the people here, begin

to explain the situation if it seemed like they were being listened to. It wasn't even supposed to be dangerous. Of course, as they were moving through so many different planes, there were times when they looked nothing like the inhabitants of the planet they were on, and then there was always the chance of a very hostile reception. But here, there were definitely at least some humans and that should have made this easy for them, so they weren't worried.

They had been out for a few hours, and Juno had spent most of that doing not a lot. He was bored cooking without Ben and he was bored down in the lab without Peter, so he settled for lying on the sofa in the living room reading one of Peter's magic textbooks.

It was interesting- a little darker than Juno would have expected when he first met Peter, but now that he knew him better it wasn't too out of left field. Some of the stuff in here was straight up necromancy, though, and that wasn't exactly something he had thought about that much before.

He ended up losing track of the time, until he heard hushed voices from the hall. He strained to hear what they were saying, but he wasn't close to the door and the most he could make out was whose voices they were- Peter's and Buddy's.

They were back, then. Juno perked up a little, eager to hear whether they had made any progress yet.

But then the door opened, and Buddy stood behind it looking… honestly, a little scared. And behind her stood Jet and Peter, without Ben, looking even worse. Juno's heart rate started to speed up, and he opened his mouth to speak but he wasn't entirely sure what he should be asking. Eventually he settled on simply:

"Where's Ben?"

It came out far quieter than he had meant it to.

"Juno," Peter was the one to answer first, and he paused for a few seconds after Juno's name. "I'm so sorry."

"We should have taken more precautions," Buddy continued. "I assumed this planet would be friendly and it wasn't. I take responsibility for that as your captain." She sounded genuinely crushed and Juno knew that not all of it was for his sake- they had lost people a lot, but it was early and the first time someone died was always the worst.

He couldn't really think about that right now, though. He couldn't really think about anything at all. It felt like someone had reached into his chest and taken out his heart, and they'd flipped everything else inside him upside down while they were at it. He wanted to scream, or be sick, or something.

"Juno, what do you need us to do?" Buddy's voice sounded more distant than it should have, and Juno realised the room had been silent for a while.

"I'm going to bed."

He hauled himself up from the sofa and crossed the room. As he reached the door he could hear Peter protesting and Buddy saying something about speaking to someone if there was something he needed, but he ignored it and walked straight past both of them. Jet was wide enough to almost be in his way as he started down the hall so he made a show of it and knocked into him deliberately as he passed. Jet didn't move an inch, which just made Juno feel even worse.

Juno slammed the door to his room behind him, and just fell face first onto the bed.

This was something Juno did a lot when something went wrong, or when he just felt like shit. Except usually it would be his brother's bed, and he would fall face first next to Ben, and he could talk through it with the person he trusted most in the world. And if he didn't want to talk, Ben would talk for the both of them, or they would sit in silence and Ben would hold onto him or mess with his hair until he was a little more okay.

There was a big part of Juno that was lying on his bed waiting for his twin's hand in his hair.

But it wasn't going to come.

Since they had been on the Carte Blanche, Juno had been drinking far less than he had done back on Mars. Partly because he was busier here, and partly because he just didn't feel like he needed to as much. But right now he had fuck all to do, and he needed something so that he could stop feeling like someone was stabbing him in the chest.

By the end of the afternoon, Juno was passed out in almost the same position he had fallen earlier, his hand hanging from the side of the bed next to the empty bottle he had been drinking from.

There was only so long that someone could be locked in their room in silence before simply giving them space ceased to be an option.

In this case, it seemed like there was a general consensus that the line should be drawn when it stopped being the afternoon and became properly night-time. Of course it wasn't exactly healthy to close yourself off from everyone in the day, either, but it was understandable when you had lost your twin.

The night seemed more dangerous, somehow, and the remaining five members of the crew had agreed in meaningful glances and quiet words that if they didn't at least check in on Juno before they slept, they were worried they would regret it in the morning. It wouldn't be the first time someone had decided they wanted to, well, take a year out, as it were.

There was a brief debate as to who should go, and Rita volunteered herself. They were close, even more so than all of them were, and she was good at getting through to him.

She knocked lightly on the door and called out.

"Mistah Steel?" She paused, but there was no response. "D'you wanna unlock the door so I can come in?"

When there was still no answer, she took a step backwards away from the door and peered through the open doorway from the hall into the living room.

"Um, guys?" Rita said, and made a gesture towards the others that wasn't quite a wave. "It's awful quiet in his room."

Buddy got up from the table and joined Rita outside Juno's door.

"Juno, dear, is everything alright?" She knocked and spoke a little louder than Rita had to make sure that they weren't simply going unheard, but there was no response, and she couldn't hear any signs of movement from the other side of the door. She then tried again with exactly the same result. There was almost no chance that Juno would have just decided to go to sleep in this state- at best he would meditate, and if he had been meditating he would have been able to hear them and respond.

"That is more than a little worrying," she said, and then, making an

executive decision: “Jet, would you be a darling and break down this door for me?”
Jet positioned himself in front of the door and then turned towards it to speak.

“If you are next to the door, Juno, I would ask that you stand back.” He instructed, and after a short pause to allow Juno to move if he needed to, he kicked in the door.

Buddy wasn’t sure if she was relieved or heartbroken by the scene inside. On the one hand, she had half expected not to find Juno alive, and the man in front of her was definitely breathing. On the other hand, he was lying face down on the bed having clearly passed out drunk. It wasn’t something they talked about much anymore, but Juno had left Mars with a drinking habit bordering on straight-up alcoholism. She and the rest of the crew had helped and it had gotten better, but she should have expected that it would crop back up again given a glaring opportunity like this.

Peter, who of course had joined them by now, went over to Juno and made an attempt to wake him. He shifted a little, but his eyes stayed closed.

“Maybe it’s better if he sleeps for now,” Rita sighed, “at least that way he can’t drink any more.” She crossed the room and sat on the bed next to Juno, cross-legged. There were tears in her eyes and she leaned down to put her arm around Juno, taking his hand and holding onto it between them.

“Alright, let’s not crowd the lady,” Buddy started. Everyone but Vespa was in Juno’ bedroom or stood in his doorway staring, and even though there was a good reason, it felt like a little much. “Someone needs to stay here with him, but we can’t do much else until he’s awake. Rita, sweetheart, are you okay taking care of him tonight?”

Rita nodded eagerly.

“I’ll look after him Miss Buddy, I promise.”

“Rita, would you mind sitting up momentarily?” Peter asked. She did, looking reluctant to let go of Juno, and watched as Peter gently shifted Juno onto his side, bending his knee so that he wouldn’t roll back over again in his sleep. “There, now he won’t suffocate himself.”

Inexplicably, this set Rita off sobbing. She looked so distraught that despite Buddy’s desire for the room to be a little less crowded, she

couldn't help but to go to her. As she went she glanced behind her to dismiss Jet, and he acknowledged her with a wordless nod before heading in the direction of his own bedroom.

Peter looked slightly intimidated by Rita's distress, and hesitantly reached across the still-sleeping Juno to take one of her hands in his own. Buddy sat down next to her, intending to hold her other hand, but instead Rita fell sideways into her and buried her face in her shirt.

"I'm sorry," Rita hiccupped, her voice breaking as she spoke. "I'm just so- so- worried about Mistah Steel."

Buddy wrapped an arm around her shoulders and said: "It's okay. We'll make sure he's alright. I will speak to Vespa and she can help him too, she's a good doctor. And none of us will allow any harm to come to him if we can help it, you know that."

Rita nodded into Buddy's shirt, and the crying seemed to slow down.

"Okay, Miss Buddy," she sniffed, and pulled back from Buddy to wipe her face. She had almost stopped crying now, but upon seeing that she had made her captain's shirt wet a few more tears rolled down her cheeks. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to ruin your shirt, I can clean it, or get you a new one, or-"

"Come now, darling, of course I don't mind at all," Buddy cut her off before she could work herself up again. "Do you still want to stay here tonight? It's alright if you don't, Peter or I would be happy to watch over Juno."

Rita didn't answer immediately, instead looking over at Juno, clearly conflicted. She wanted to be there for her friend, but Buddy could tell that she was overwhelmed.

"If it's alright with you, Rita, perhaps we could both stay. I'm worried too, and I'm sure you would take care of our dear Juno brilliantly, but it would reassure me if I could be here." Peter suggested.
Buddy shot him a very grateful look.

"That would be nice." Rita almost whispered.

"Wonderful. If you need anything at all, please let myself or Vespa know and we will come immediately." Buddy got up from the bed and turned to leave. The last thing she felt like doing was sleeping, but she knew she needed it after today, and she trusted that Juno would be kept safe until morning.

At the door, she bid her two conscious shipmates goodnight, and they echoed the words back to her.

Despite her exhaustion, it took her a long while to quiet her mind enough to sleep.

The rest of the year was difficult. Juno slept through the night and reluctantly spoke to Vespa in the morning, but he didn't say much to her. He promised them there would be no repeat of the previous night, and then carried on to do exactly the same thing every night for the next week. Even when they managed to put a stop to that (with the help of some extremely thinly veiled threats from Vespa), Juno was still frequently seen spiking most of his drinks throughout the day with one kind of alcohol or another.

Peter became reluctant to leave Juno alone when he could help it- even when Juno refused to help, Peter would ask him to sit in the lab while he researched, and he would narrate everything he did until Juno snapped at him to be quiet.

Rita took to making Juno's morning coffee for him, taking the seat directly in front of the drinks cabinet and refusing to move until breakfast was finished.

Eventually, once they had made a very tentative peace with the locals, Buddy went out to buy a lock. She gathered all the bottles she could find and managed to fit them all in the cabinet, locking it once she was done. There was one key, and she kept it herself.

When they found the Light, it was a celebration, the same as it always was. They had gotten off to a rocky start with this world but the people here were still people and they deserved to be saved. And over the course of the nine months they had been there, they had made allies, even a few friends. Juno didn't agree. He sat quietly for a while as the others talked excitedly, putting up with it for the sake of appearances, but he could bring himself to care. These people had destroyed his brother and his life, and were they to be destroyed too he would have been perfectly okay with that. He retreated to his room, mumbling something sarcastic about being happy for them. Nobody followed him.

For almost three full days before the reset was due, Juno barely moved from the spot where he knew his brother would reappear. He got up to go to the toilet, but that was it. The others brought him food

every so often but he was too anxious to do much more than pick at it. In a matter of hours, his brother would be by his side again, where he should have been all along. It would have been impossible to even try to think about anything else when that was infinitely more important.

The moment the crew reformed on the deck, Juno fell into Ben's arms, already sobbing.

"Hey, hey it's okay," Ben whispered into Juno's hair, sounding a little confused. "I'm here. Did something happen?"

Juno let out a pained sound from the back of his throat. Ben had left him for a year and somehow didn't understand what that had done to him. He honestly thought he might die if he had to explain aloud everything that had happened since Ben had died.

"You *died*," the word 'died' turned into another loud sob as it came out, and Ben tightened his grip on his brother in response.

"Okay, okay. I know." Juno felt Ben leading him away from the others and into the living room. They sat down clumsily on the sofa, Ben pulling Juno towards him so that he was practically sat in his lap.

When Juno glanced around quickly, he saw that they were alone- obviously everyone else had decided to give them some privacy for this.

"I'm here now, okay? You did so good, Super Steel. Did you do the whole year?" Ben asked, and Juno nodded. "I'm so proud of you, that's so good."

It took a while for Juno to tell Ben all of what had happened while he had been gone- in the end, it had taken Peter threatening to tell Ben himself that had prompted Juno to sit down and talk.

It helped far more than Juno had thought it would. Not just that cycle either- the next time Ben died and Juno didn't, Juno knew exactly what his brother would say and how he would feel if he was there, and it was just enough to stop him from falling down the same rabbit hole again.

But that didn't stop Buddy putting the lock back on the cabinet every year that Ben was gone.

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Juno and Ben were well past the point of needing to knock on each others' doors before they entered. They had nothing to hide from each other, and if one of them needed some alone time, then, well, he could put a sock on the handle.

Somehow, though, this felt different. Juno was more nervous for this conversation than he had ever been for a conversation with his twin, and he needed it to have some sort of build-up.

There could quite literally be life of death consequences riding on how this converstion was about to go.

It only took a moment to get a response, and despite the nerves, a vaguely annoyed-sounding *"What?"* from Ben was invitation enough for Juno to open the door and step across the threshold.

Ben was at his desk, reading, and Juno perched on the edge of it so that he could see his brother's face.

As expected, Ben could tell immediately that there was something serious happening. He pushed aside his books and moved his chair back a little so that he could look at Juno without craning his neck. Juno took a deep breath before he began to speak.

"I gotta ask you something, and it's gonna sound ridiculous, but I need you to take me seriously." Something in Juno's tone or on his face must have got across how serious he was, because Ben leaned forward in his chair, his brow furrowed in concern.

"What's up, Super Steel?"

"I know it sounds weird, but I… I need you to help me have a really, really good day. If you can, I need you to give me the best day ever. It doesn't have to be now, it needs more planning than that, but- think about it and when you can, just, really go for it. Does that make sense?"

Ben nodded slowly, but the frown was still there. If anything, he probably looked even more concerned than he had before, but confused now on top of it.

"Sure, of course, but can I ask why?"

For a moment, Juno considered not telling him. There was the possibility that he would refuse to help if the reason frightened him,

and Juno knew that he would have to go through with his plan either way. It would just be far, far more dangerous without Ben's support.

But the earnest look on Ben's face dissipated that thought almost immediately. He had never been able to deny his brother anything that was actually important, and besides, he would have to find out eventually. Even imagining the look Ben would give him if he found out that Juno had kept something so important from him made him wince.

"Don't freak out, okay?" He started, and waited for Ben's nod before continuing. "Peter and I have been doing some research, and we think we can do something that's going to make these cycles safer, for all of us. We won't have to worry so much about what happens if we all die in the same cycle… but it's pretty risky."

Juno paused again, and Ben raised an eyebrow. He hurried to clarify before Ben had the chance to convince himself against the idea.

"But if you do this for me, it'll be safer. This is the best way I can think to help us do this."

Ben sighed and ran a hand down his face, and Juno worried that he would say no, that it sounded too dangerous- but he simply said:

"Okay."

"You'll do it?" Juno let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding. Ben nodded.

"Sure," Ben gave him a cheesy grin, "Just give me some time to plan it. Only the best for my bro." He pulled his books back towards him and playfully pushed Juno out of the way. He wasn't forceful but Juno was already balanced so precariously on the edge of the desk that he fell off and had to grab Ben's chair to keep his balance.

"Fuck you!" He laughed, and went to lie on Ben's bed to bother him while he studied, the tension he had felt a few minutes ago dissipated entirely.

There had never been any reason to doubt that his brother would have his back.

It was obvious that Ben was scared, when it came down to it, even

though he tried to hide it as best he could.

It had been a few days since he had given Juno the best day ever, when Juno had explained to him exactly what he had meant when he said he had been researching a risky type of magic. He had been worried then, too, Juno knew, but now he was terrified.

Juno and Peter had both told him that he didn't have to watch- there was no need for him to be there if it would only work him up more, but he had insisted.

"You think I'm missing out on seeing this?" He had said in front of Peter, "It's gonna look awesome."

Later, to Juno, he had begrudgingly admitted that he would worry more if he couldn't see what was happening.

Now, Juno stood at the top of a hill with Peter, Ben a few feet away, barely concealing his shaking hands and forcing a carefree expression onto his face.

By this point, the two had been studying this spell for months, memorising each and every line of the runes and familiarising themselves with the importance of each part. They worked perfectly in tandem, reaching around each other to complete their own shapes, careful not to block each others' paths or disturb what was already drawn.

When it was almost finished, they paused, and turned to face each other. Juno pulled Peter in for a long hug, and kissed him softly, gently cupping his face in his hands. He took a moment to just look at him. His beautiful, angular face, his pointed teeth as he smiled at Juno, the flyaway strand of hair he had spent almost thirty minutes trying to put into its place that morning to no avail.

Aside from his brother, Juno could think of nobody better to be his anchor than the man standing in front of him.

"You ready? Gonna keep it together?" Juno asked, a hint of how serious he actually was creeping through beneath his teasing tone. Peter smiled at him, and lifted a hand to squeeze his shoulder.

"Of course I'm ready, darling," Peter replied, and in the last moment that they were in their bodies, he leaned forward and kissed Juno on the forehead.

And then they were liches, as their bodies fell to the ground, for a moment Juno felt himself losing control. But he pushed the panic down, and thought about his anchors. He thought about his brother, standing and watching this magic he didn't understand just because he loved him. He thought about Peter, in front of him, who he wanted to spend forever with and would have more time with if they could make this work. And he thought about the rest of their teammates, their family, currently oblivious and going about their days elsewhere.

It didn't take long for him to calm, and in that new clarity he could see Peter beside him doing the same and felt a wave of relief wash over him.

He watched Peter nod to Ben before lowering back down into his body, and looked over at his twin. He looked like he had seen a ghost, which Juno supposed was appropriate, and he wringing his hands so hard it looked like it hurt, but seeing Juno looking at him and coherent he gave a shaky smile.

Juno dabbed, and lowered himself back into his own body as his brother sighed deeply and buried his face in his hands.

It was normal, then, apart from Ben fretting like something would go wrong at any moment. The others found out one by one over the rest of the cycle, mostly by accident- neither Juno nor Ben were the best at secrets.

The real payoff came at the end of the year, with the power to use his lich form to blow up a part of the Hunger. It was only one of dozens, of hundreds, but it was something. It was a start. And it was exhilarating.

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There are some things it's impossible to understand unless you experience them first hand. No matter how much you think about the hypothetical- imagine how you would feel, what you would do- the reality will always catch you off guard.

This, Juno thought, was one of those things.

They had spent so long thinking about how much damage their relics would cause this planet that they thought they understood what they were doing, but every time they got news of a relic taking yet more lives, it crushed them more than any of them could have possibly imagined.

Every cycle that they didn't retrieve the light of creation, the entire planet had been consumed by the Hunger, and they all grieved each and every time that happened.

At least this way, that couldn't happen again- Juno had agreed with the others that this was better, but he wasn't so sure now. When the Hunger destroyed a planet, that was the Hunger's fault. This felt like his fault. He had helped to create the relics and release them into the world and for that, he felt like a murderer.

He didn't talk about it with the rest of the crew. He didn't deserve

their pity or for them to comfort him- he wasn't the victim here, he was the perpetrator.

So he dealt with it alone. More and more often, he holed himself up in his room alone, so much so that he overheard a conversation between Buddy and Jet about whether they should start keeping an eye on how much alcohol was being consumed, just in case.

And then, he was lying by himself on a hill, watching the Phoenix Fire Gauntlet destroy yet another town, and he knew that he couldn't let this go on any longer. He wouldn't be able to bear it.

He didn't have a plan at all when he set off down the hill. Until the moment that he did it, he hadn't even been sure that he was really going to. Even as he wrote the note for his family and left it on the table, there had been a part of him that had thought he return as soon as this battle had run its course.

There were no details in the note. If they had known what Juno was doing, they might have tried to stop him- and if not they would have tried to help him, and all it would have done was put them in danger.

It took a few days for Juno to find the right place to hide the gauntlet. It needed to be looked for, to be wanted by people, but completely inaccessible. He asked around as many people in as many places as he could, but most of the suggestions were too simple- to bury it, to buy a safe, to throw it into the sea. None of them would work.

And then, when he had almost given up, sat drinking in a bar alone, he overheard a conversation about a cave. And about a vault, deep inside it.

From what he could hear over the general din of the bar, it was an abandoned mine- better than just a cave; less people would have access to it- and these dwarves that were talking about it clearly knew someone who could get him in. The part of Juno that was drunk and frustrated wanted to file the information away to follow up in the morning, but the far larger part of him that knew this was the best thing he had come across in days couldn't take the chance that he wouldn't remember.

So he leaned across the table towards them, and they looked at him, confused.

"Sorry, you're talking kind of loud so I can't help but overhear. Who is this you're talking about? The security guy?"

“Why do you want to know?” The reply came from the largest member of the party- a huge orc with a scar that spanned the entire left side of their face lengthwise.

“I’m curious, sue me.” Juno was just intoxicated enough that he held the orc’s gaze as they tried to stare him down, and Juno dimly realised somewhere in the back of his mind that he was extremely lucky that the orc seemed to find this funny, rather than offensive.

“This one’s cousin,” they nudged the dwarven man next to them, and he almost fell off his seat. “Cyrus Rockseeker. Does security.”

That was all the information Juno needed, and the next day he found himself walking with that same Cyrus Rockseeker, deep into Wave Echo Cave.

This was it. Every step Juno took towards the vault, he could feel more of the weight that had built up over the past months lifting from his chest, and he felt like he could breathe freely for the first time in a long time. And he felt victorious. It was a small victory, he knew, and he was only eliminating one relic of the seven they had created, but it was better than sitting by and doing nothing while the world burned around him.

It felt like the journey through the cave took years, though it couldn’t have been more than half the afternoon- time was being painfully drawn out by the specific brand of impatience that only shows its face right at the very end of a long wait.

“Well, here it is,” Cyrus said.

And then the door was opening.

Juno took out the gauntlet from the bag he was travelling with, and took a moment to gather himself. In that moment, as he watched the door to the vault slowly open, he wasn’t watching Cyrus.

He felt a dagger slash across his back, and as he instinctively stumbled forwards away from it, Cyrus took advantage of his shock, darted around from behind him and pulled the gauntlet from his hands.

Losing his grip on the gauntlet jolted him back into action. He could not let this happen; he would be wreaking destruction on this world a second time over. Juno could feel that he was too hurt already to fight, so he did the only thing he could think to do.

A powerful Thunderwave, at the highest level Juno could cast it, flung Cyrus away from him and into the vault, along with the gauntlet he was still clutching tight. The force caught the open doors at the outside of its range, giving Juno just enough time to see the look of furious shock on Cyrus's face before they slammed closed behind him.

There was a brief moment in which all Juno could feel was relief, before he registered that the wound on his back felt a lot worse than it should have. The pain was spreading, pulsing through his body and he immediately recognised the effects of silverpoint poison.

Shit. If he died now, he wouldn't be able to get his physical body back. At least there was some small comfort in that the reason for it was a good one- quite possibly the best one there could have been.

Still, he would have vastly preferred to actually be able to interact with this world for the time he was in it. Obviously.

But then, as Juno's lich form left his body, he saw the umbrastaff at his side start to move and a second terrible realisation hit. He was about to get consumed by his own fucking umbrella and there was not a thing he could do about it. He wouldn't even be able to leave this goddamn cave until someone came to find him.

There was a while where Juno wasn't aware of anything at all, but when he was, all he could see were the black walls of the inside of the umbrella. He had no idea how much time had passed, and he wasn't sure that he wanted to. It wouldn't change anything now. Given enough time, he knew his friends would find him and bring him home.

All he could do now was sit and wait.

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Sometimes, just occasionally, Peter could almost think about something else other than the fact that Juno was missing.

But every time it happened, he would look up and there would be Ben. And his subconscious would think "Juno" and his heart would soar for just a moment before he registered the hairstyle and the piercings and the lack of scarring across his nose, and it would plummet right back down like a rock to the bottom of his stomach.

(Juno hated that scar, but Peter loved it because it was Juno. After a

century of seeing it, he started to take it for granted- he never would have thought it possible to miss just looking at someone's scars so much.)

He and Ben were spending most of their time together, recently. The only time they were apart was when they had split up cover more ground in the search for Juno.
Peter thought that maybe they both needed the comfort of being around someone they knew was hurting just as much as they were.

And then, one day, everything changed.

Peter was leaning, half asleep from overworking himself, over a map on a table he'd dragged out onto the deck of the Carte Blanche. He didn't even notice Ben was there until he spoke; too focussed on being *sure* that he would be searching in the right place this time.

"How's it going?" Ben asked quietly.

Peter startled awake, narrowly avoiding knocking the map off of the table entirely.

"Oh! Sorry, yes, um-" he shook his head as if to dispel the tiredness before he continued, pointing at the map as he spoke "There is a dungeon, over here beyond the Felicity Wilds. There's a lot of arcane energy coming off of it… I was planning to search it tonight, if you would like to come with me?"

"Sure," Ben nodded. "It's as good a place as any, I guess. I can go down and see if I can pick anything up with magic while you talk to people, see if anyone's seen anything?"

"Yes, thank you dear."

There was a lull in conversation for a second, both of them stood on opposite sides of the table looking at the map. After a while of doing nothing except searching, they had started to run out of things to say in moments like this, but it was more a comfortable quiet than an awkward one. They were still family, after all.

But even so, the silence lent itself to thinking, and Peter's thoughts at the moment were not going anywhere positive.

"Ben, what if he's just gone?"

"Who?"

Peter was only confused for the briefest of moments before he realised what was happening. He glanced down at the map he was still leaning on and realised he didn't know why he had brought it out here. He thought about Juno and realised the details he knew he loved so deeply were starting to blur and fade in his mind.

"Why- what are we- I can't remember his face. Benzaiten, I can't-"

"Whose face?"

And he looked around, and he didn't know why he was on a ship. But he realised that what he did know was how to remember. So he looked at over the side of the deck and took in the long fall to the ground and said:

"Ben. Kill me- I need you to kill me! I'll be okay, I'll remember if I'm a lich- please, Ben, just kill me, I can't forget, I'm begging you-"

Even as the words left his mouth, he forgot what he was begging for; knowing only that it would be the end of everything if he didn't get what he wanted. Then he was falling from the ship, and he was smiling and he didn't know who this man was standing on the deck or why he was smiling at the person who just murdered him.

And then he hit the ground.

And he remembered.

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Rita had been thinking for a long time. She had hoped that what her family had done here would work and she had tried to keep that hope burning as she watched the world turn to black, watched people die, watched the hearts of everyone around her shatter and felt her own do the same.

There was always going to be a breaking point.

If anyone had asked, she wouldn't have been able to pinpoint anything specific that did it. She had simply reached her limit. She couldn't carry on doing this anymore.

She had come up with a plan decades ago, and she wanted to put it into action. She wanted the help of her friends to do so, but she knew she couldn't have it. If they tried to stop her, Rita knew she wouldn't be able to carry on- not only would there be five of them to only one of her, but if she could see the looks on their faces as they asked her not to do this?

There was no way she would be able to do it.

And so, she came up with another plan, that would allow her to carry out the first. She started by copying out her records of the last century into new notebooks, painstakingly checking and rechecking her work to ensure she had all of the details right.

For this to work, Rita would have to be certain that none of her family could remember their mission of the past hundred years.

Doing this hurt more than anything else. She cried as she wrote, pushing the books away from her when she was afraid she would smudge the writing, trying not to think about the fact that the best friends she had ever had wouldn't even know who she was any more.

There would be no more movie nights, no more games, no more bickering across the kitchen about who had eaten whose food that they had been saving.

By far the worst of it all was having to decide that Ben would not remember Juno.

Juno was her best friend, even above everyone else, and him being missing was excruciating for her- but twins were supposed to be together. She couldn't stand how wrong it felt to be doing this, like separating them for a second time.

But eventually, she finished writing.

She waited until everyone was busy, and she took the newly written books over to Fisher's tank, and she dropped them in one by one.

Right as Fisher grabbed hold of the final book, the door opened.

It was Jet.

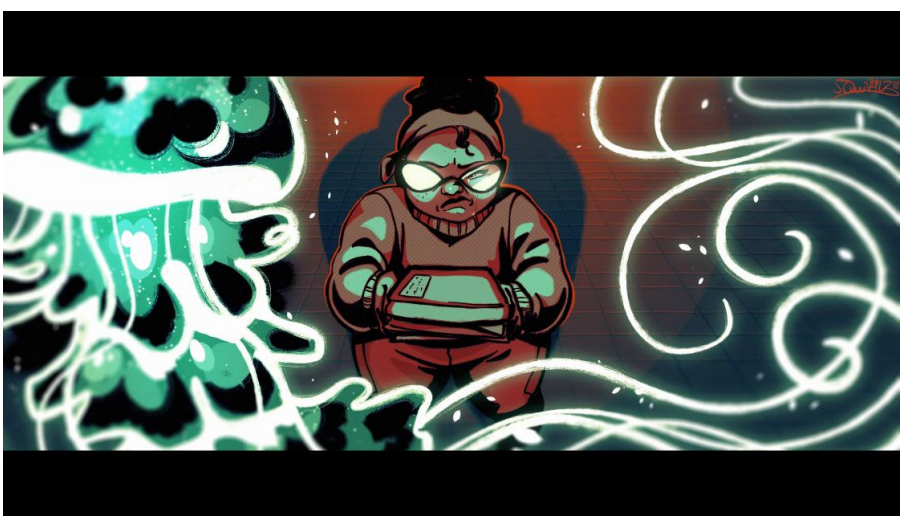
She saw the exact moment that he realised what she was doing, but it only lasted a second before it was replaced by confusion and she knew that he was already forgetting.

“What are you- what is happening?” Jet sounded more confused than he had in the entire time Rita had known him, and hearing it set her off sobbing again.

“I’m so sorry, Mister Jet, you weren’t supposed to see this,” she sniffed, and put a hand on his arm. “I promise it’ll be okay, I’m sorry, it’s just for now, I love you, I love all of you, I’m so sorry-”

The string of words cut off as he looked at her and frowned. He looked down at her hand on his arm and took a step back, and at that moment Rita thought she might be sick. She waited for him to start shouting, to demand answers from her, but all he said as he stumbled away from her was a quiet, confused:

“Who are you?”



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It had been so long since Juno had become trapped inside his own goddamn umbrella that he’d close to given up on anyone ever finding him at all. He had no way of knowing how long his family would have looked for him, whether they were still looking for him now, or if they had given up on seeing him again. He didn’t know which would be worse. Knowing someone was still looking would be nice, but he didn’t like to think about anyone in so much pain over him.

And he was so, so bored. After living for over a century he would never have expected a decade to feel so long, but he honestly wouldn't have found it difficult to believe if someone had told him he'd been missing for fifty years instead of ten. It was enough to make him regret coming to find his relic in the first place.

Well, no, it wasn't. He regretted not telling anyone where he was going, regretted not speaking to Ben or to Peter before he left, regretted dying and regretted thinking this fucking umbrella wouldn't backfire on him- but he couldn't regret trying to clean up at least some of the mess that he had helped to make on this planet.

That said, Juno would still rather the whole situation had turned out any other way.

It was a particularly boring day- or night, or whatever, it was difficult to tell- when Juno heard three very familiar voices he hadn't truly expected to ever hear again.

There were other voices too, which he hadn't really been listening to, but as soon as he noticed he snapped to attention immediately. At first, he thought he was hallucinating. After so many years alone, staring at black fabric with nobody to talk to but himself, he had finally snapped. He had gone insane.

To be completely honest, insanity would have been infinitely less surprising than the reality that those actually were his shipmates- his friends, his family, three of the most important people in his life with whom he had spent over a century.

As they came closer, he could make out their sentences more clearly. Jet spoke first:

"The cane is magic," he said in his usual monotone, which, *duh*. That was pretty much the last thing Juno expected anyone to need to clarify, but whatever. All that mattered was that they pieced together what had happened, which shouldn't be hard considering Juno's skeleton was still sporting his red IPRE uniform and clutching the umbrastaff, and let him the hell out. Now that the end of all this seemed so close, Juno was growing more desperate by the moment.

He felt Vespa cast detect magic on the staff- *what?* - and she drew in a sharp breath at the result.

"What kind of vibe d'you get?" Ben asked her, and even though Juno didn't technically have a heartbeat right then, he could have sworn his

heart skipped a beat at the sound of his brother so close to him.

He closed his eyes and prayed to whoever might have heard him that Ben knew he was there.

Vespa didn't respond to the question. She grumbled a little and took a step closer to Juno, but stopped.

"I think I need to wrap this in something," she said- warily, which was an uncommon tone for Vespa.

"Wrap it in the robe," Ben suggested.

By this point, Juno knew something definitely wasn't right. For none of them to have made the connection between the scene in front of them and Juno was impossible. That meant they had forgotten at least the umbrastaff, and the red robes… and if they had forgotten that, did they remember Juno himself? The thought that his twin might not know him any more sent a jolt of pain through Juno's chest, but it looked like it was very possible.

Juno could feel the staff shifting as Vespa pulled the edge of his robe forwards, consequently shifting his body itself. And then she wrapped her hand around the handle of the umbrastaff.

Juno liked Vespa. He did- he had known her for more than a hundred years, and though she was abrasive and, to be honest pretty terrifying at first, she was genuinely good in her own way, and loyal to those she loved. After Juno had figured out how she worked, they actually got along well.

But, he had known her for more than a hundred years. And so he knew that if she picked up the umbrastaff right now, she was not going to give it to Ben, or even to Jet. He would end up being carted around by her until further notice, and sure, that wasn't too terrible, but Ben was right there and he had missed him more than he could even attempt to put into words.

So as soon as Vespa's grip tightened ready to pull the staff from Juno's skeletal hands, he used all the energy he could muster to throw her as far away from him as possible. When he heard her thud against the far wall he winced. He hadn't meant to actually hurt her, but going by the lack of audible concern from Ben and Jet she was probably okay.

"I'll give it a whirl!"

This managed to put a small smile on Juno's face, just for a moment. Of course Ben's first instinct, after witnessing Vespa literally thrown across the room, was to try exactly the same thing she had just tried. He had expected Ben to try to take the staff- he was relying on it- but Juno had missed his enthusiasm and can-do attitude, just, *so much*.

Just as Vespa had, Ben pulled the robe to wrap it around the handle of the umbrastaff before he took hold of it. His grip felt different to Vespa's- for one, it was not quite hesitant, but definitely more deliberate- he was expecting the staff to put up a fight. But also, it just felt… more right.

This time, the blast of power that came from Juno wasn't deliberate at all. He was worried for a second that the joy he felt at Ben's touch had created an effect similar to what he had done to Vespa, but after a few moments of Ben's body literally beaming out light, it died down and he easily slipped the staff from the hands of Juno's skeleton.

Usually, Juno would have given his undivided attention to everything that happened after that, especially considering that nothing had happened to him, or even around him, that was this interesting in a long time.

But what had just happened was the one thing he had been waiting for for years, and it had gone… very differently than expected. Juno could only pay attention to his own warring emotions- he was overjoyed at having his family back, yes, but how in all the universes had they *forgotten him?*

This was going to take some fixing, and Juno had no idea where to even begin.

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Watching everything that was happening to his family and not being able to do anything about it was *infuriating.*

It was *constant.* To an extent, he could understand. Rita wanted to stop what was happening with the relics, and ultimately Juno had wanted that too, even if he hadn't gone so far as she was going.

But as much as he had hated watching almost everything that had happened since they had found him, this was by far the worst. It was just so fucking pointless. Rita had sent them to this place- Wonderland- clearly knowing that all it was was a death trap, and now these two fucking liches were making his friends suffer just because they could.

He tried to tear through the black walls of the umbrella, but he already knew he would get nowhere. *You've been trying this same shit for years. Why would it be any different now?* He thought, bitterly.

Eventually he resigned himself to sitting and listening, heart breaking for his friends as they were forced to give up more and more, wishing he could make each sacrifice in their place.

He started screaming when Ben gave up his ability to dance, all sorts of threats and profanities that nobody could hear but him. Even on their hundred year journey, that had been a part of Ben's identity, something he *needed*, and Juno could hear in his voice how much it was tearing his brother apart to lose that part of himself.

The only small comfort- and it really was small- was that Ben, Vespa and Jet were still looking out for each other. It was very clear to Juno at this point just how little they all remembered, but there was still something in them that knew they belonged together. He sent a silent thank you to Jet for making sure Ben knew he could say no to the sacrifices without judgement from him.

Once the fighting started, it was more difficult to discern what was happening. His heart jumped into his throat every time he heard anyone shout, petrified that it was the sound of someone losing consciousness or dying.

When Juno heard the ring of the Animus Bell, and Jet's voice proclaiming that Wonderland wasn't that bad, he lay down and screamed into the floor.

And then Jet was inside a mannequin, and he was pretty sure Peter was helping them now, and then, as everything was escalating in a matter of seconds, Ben fell. Juno stopped hearing anything for a while after that. His ears started ringing and he was calling out to his twin, knowing it was no use but needing to do it anyway.

But suddenly, he had company.

One of the liches- Cecil, he was sure he had said his name was, and his sister was Cassandra- was in the umbrella with him, scrambling to his knees.

"Who are you? Where am I?"

Juno turned to him with a cold smile, and said:

"Are you the one who's been hurting my brother out there?"

"Am I what? What is this?" Cecil demanded. Juno gritted his teeth, took a step forward, and spat his next words.

"I'm gonna fucking kill you now."

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Everything was coming together. Ben remembered him, everyone remembered what they had been through together, the Hunger was here but they were going to fight and he felt so sure that they could win.

It was everything Juno had wanted for more than ten years.

And he wasn't even part of it.

But he had been preparing for this. Each time Juno had cast a spell from inside the Umbrastaff, it had taken months to build up enough magical energy to do so, but he had been saving and right now he knew he had enough. It was just a matter of time until he found the right moment to let go of it, when it would be the most helpful to the others.

It hadn't been much help at all when he had burned a name into the wall that nobody but Rita remembered, and even less when he had had an outburst in front of Ben's new beau- although he thought that was probably justified given that the man would have been rid of both Juno and Peter given half a chance.

There was a moment of panic when the staff was flung from Ben's hands, and he was worried that that would be it- if he was just lying on the ground, he wouldn't be able to do anything at all. It only took a

second, though, before it was picked up again, and he heard a familiar voice.

“Is this okay, sir?” Angus shouted, panicked, as he pointed the staff in the direction of the rhinoceros that had just charged into Ben and landed Juno on the ground.

“Shit, fine, go for it!”

Juno winced at the pained twinge in his brother’s voice. This was not going as well as it could have been. At all. Ben was hurt, and it would only get worse if nobody stepped in. It was the best opportunity Juno was going to get to intervene, and with any luck it would be obvious that the kid wasn’t the one casting. If someone got him out of this fucking umbrella, he could actually be of use beyond casting a single spell.

As soon as he felt Angus begin to cast, Juno gathered every bit of the energy he had been saving for this moment, and channelling his white hot rage seeing his twin hurt, he threw the most powerful Fireball he could muster from the staff.

For a brief moment he was terrified that he would hit Ben too, but he easily rolled out of the Fireball’s range and it engulfed the rhinoceros entirely, blackening it as it fell to the ground.

Even if Juno could do nothing else in this fight, that would have been worth it. He might have just saved his brother, and that was the only thing he had really needed this whole time.
But it didn’t take long for him to realise that it wouldn’t be his only action. Immediately after the rhinoceros fell, Angus’s hands started shaking and he looked across at Ben, nervous.

“I- I’m not powerful enough to cast that! That wasn’t me, sir!” He was talking a mile a minute in his panic, his words all running into each other, but Ben must have understood him fine, because he responded:

“I know, Small Fry.” He said it quietly, almost so much so that he couldn’t be heard over the din of the fight that continued around them as they both paused, considering the implications of what Angus had just said. It couldn’t have been more than a second that they were quiet, but it felt far longer to Juno as he desperately hoped that Ben would put the pieces together.

Angus threw the staff back to Ben, and Juno felt his heart jump into his throat. He could tell, now, that Ben knew. The way he was holding

the umbrastaff, the quiet determination that he never got unless it was serious- he had worked it out.

And then, Juno heard snapping, and there was more light than there had been in the past decade, and he could move, and he could see the face of his brother in front of him.

Ben barely looked different from when Juno had seen him last- a benefit of being elves- but there was something behind his eyes that looked older, that looked more tired. Juno hadn't thought that possible after what they had already been through for a hundred years- that was a conversation he would need to have later.

Then, to the side of him, Angus- the halfling boy that Ben, and to a lesser extent the rest of the members of the Carte Blanche- had all but adopted, although none of them would ever admit it. Ben didn't give out nicknames to people he hated though, and Juno had heard Angus called 'Small Fry' more than he had heard him called his own name. Juno would have to make a point to apologise to the child for ruining his macarons. He hadn't meant for Angus's feelings to become collateral damage.

It only took a quick glance to see most of the rest of his family around too- all fighting still, the rhinoceros was far from the only threat in the room- but that could be dealt with.
The moment that he was free of the staff, the exhilaration and euphoria that he felt provided him with a new wave of explosive power. He flung sparks and flames across the room, burning the rest of the attacking creatures while deftly avoiding his family and their allies, and sent searing white hot light into the black tendril weaving its way into the room. Juno pushed the magic further and there was an explosion, filling the room but still leaving the small pockets of space that contained his friends.

When it was gone, so was that black column, and the creatures that came from it- leaving Juno in the middle of the room with hands outstretched, looking his brother in the eye for the first time in years as everyone around them stared.

Of course, there was only one reaction Juno could have had to this moment, the moment he had been building towards for so long. He turned to Ben, gave him the most disbelieving look that he could muster, found his most incredulous voice, and said:
"You're dating the grim reaper?!"

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After a decade of not being in your own body, it takes a while to get used to feeling like it really is your own again. Especially when what you see in the mirror now is different to what you spent an entire century looking at.

Juno had been so used to the scar across his nose being his most obvious feature that for a solid month after he got his body back, he did a double take every time he walked past a reflective surface. He saw Peter doing the same, too- the twins looked so similar now that at a glance it was difficult to tell them apart, and he had had to start taking a second look to make sure he wasn't kissing the wrong elf good morning.

Admittedly, this wasn't helped by the fact that the twins and their respective partners had chosen to all live in the same house. For now, anyway.

After being separated for so long, Juno and Ben couldn't stand the idea of living apart from each other- Juno had an entire decade of Ben's life to catch up on, and he had spent all of that time missing him more than anything. On top of all of that, there were days that Ben would still panic if he didn't know where his brother was, and not talking to anyone for too long still put Juno on edge.

So they had built a house. Since the day of Story and Song, they had essentially been celebrities, and although the fame was extremely strange and felt entirely undeserved, it did have the benefit that there

was plenty of money to be made simply by giving accounts, lectures and lessons. Enough to build a house big enough for two couples to share with plenty of privacy.

Of course, Ben, Juno and Peter were the only three official occupants. Being the literal grim reaper, Mick was not alive, but this home was where he spent his time when he wasn't needed by the Raven Queen.

Everyone else lived close too- so much so that it wasn't at all uncommon for them to bump into each other while shopping or out for a walk, and they barely went a day without visitors.

Today, it had been Rita.

It had been rough, with Rita, since they had remembered their century and beat the Hunger. Ben still hadn't quite warmed back up to her, blamed her for forcing him to live ten years without his brother- but Juno had been far quicker to forgive. They had been so close for so long, and he couldn't justify staying angry at someone whose intentions had only ever been the best.

She had shown up at the door with cookies, and a hopeful expression.

"Hi, Mister Steel! I hoped you'd be home! Where's everyone else?" She was grinning, but there was a nervous energy there too, and Juno hated that he'd gotten used to that being the case almost every time she visited.

"Hey, Rita. Nureyev's working, Ben's out shopping," he took the tub of cookies, since it was almost as big as her, and beckoned for her to enter as he set them down on the table. Rita looked relieved and saddened in equal measure.

"Try a cookie!" She excitedly waved her hands towards the tub, and Juno took one for himself and then handed one across to her.

He took a bite. It was salmon flavoured. But actually, surprisingly good.

"I'll make tea." He told her, and she smiled and settled herself more comfortably on the sofa.

They talked for hours. About the century, about their family, about their plans for the future, and eventually just about Rita's favourite TV characters as she showed Juno the latest drama that she had been watching.

Juno learned that the day before, Rita had visited Buddy and Vespa, and they had almost finished decorating their house, and that she had made friends with Jet's dog- which, admittedly, made for an extremely adorable mental image.

At about hour four, Peter emerged from his study, and reached across from behind Juno to grab a cookie for himself from the table.

"Mm! These are wonderful, Rita!"

"Oh! Awww, thank you so much, I wanted to match the salmon flavour to the one they used for salmon dusty crunchies at home but it was really difficult so I had to settle for this and it isn't the same but I still like them and I'm glad you do too!"

"I think you did an amazing job. Cookies taste different from dusty crunchies anyway, so I think the flavour compliments the sweetness perfectly, don't you?"

At this point Rita had stars in her eyes, and Juno reached up to squeeze Peter's hand affectionately. She nodded enthusiastically, and took another cookie for herself before turning back to the screen.

Juno tilted his head back to meet the eyes of his husband stood behind him. Peter leaned down and gave Juno a chaste kiss on the forehead before taking a step back.

"I'll go start the dinner. Have fun, darling." He said, before leaving for the kitchen. Juno pulled a face, but didn't protest. Peter couldn't cook to save his life, but he was actually kind of engrossed in 'Mermaid Kittens Save the World". There were… some curious similarities between the mermaid kittens and his friends, but he let it slide. Besides, when Ben got home he would send him in to do damage control.

It only took about twenty more minutes before Juno heard the door opening, and the rustling of bags that could only have come from Ben after a clothes shopping trip. He turned around, and shot a meaningful look at Ben, then to the kitchen, and back again.

Ben's mouth formed a silent 'O', and Juno thought he would head straight for the kitchen, but instead he sat on the arm of the sofa next to Juno, and reached across him for a cookie.

"What are you watching?"

Juno went to answer, but realised that Ben wasn't looking at him, but at Rita. She looked at him with her mouth hanging open for just a moment too long before she answered, the usual volume and pep in her voice obviously dampened by uncertainty.

"Um, Mermaid Kittens Save the World! Do- do you wanna watch with us?"

He shook his head and stood, and Rita's face fell for a moment. But before he left, he circled round and took one of Rita's cookies, and took a bite.

"These are really good, Rita."

She opened her mouth to say something else, but he turned away towards the kitchen and started talking again.

"I'll go make sure our dinner is edible by the time it's finished." And he walked away.

It wouldn't have seemed like much to someone on the outside, but it was more than Rita had gotten from Ben in a long time. Juno knew how big of a deal that was from him, and so did Rita judging by the way that she was practically vibrating in her seat.

What it was, though, was a sign. They had all been through so much, and so much damage had been done, but bit by bit they were healing.

And one day, maybe they would be okay.

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